

Whose Mountain Is it?

Twin Valley Middle School:

"The Mountain Movers"

Cathy L. Taschner and Kimberly R. Donahue

They said it couldn't be done, and just in case anyone was in doubt, they had all the excuses perfectly, and neatly, ready for presentation to anyone who might even consider thinking that it could be done! After all, the idea of including everyone was WAY, WAY out there! This statement, of course, is always the precursor to the "mountainous" litany of excuses that are used to keep us in a no comfort zone. You've probably heard some of these statements repeated time and time again in a school near you:

1. "Those students will really do much better in a resource room (we're only thinking of the kids)."
2. "Those students will hold all the other students back!"
3. "Those students can't keep up."
4. "Treating those students differently isn't 'fair.'"
5. "I haven't been trained to teach 'those students.'"
6. "They would do much better in a 'special' school that 'specializes' in those kinds of 'special' students."
7. "I have 28 other kids in my class who need me."
8. "They can't read!"

As educators we often find ourselves rationalizing about seemingly difficult tasks and in doing so we inadvertently build a mountain of excuses as to why something won't work. This article details the story of one school who *decided* that their school would be about "EVERY" learner, where every teacher would stretch themselves to understand the art of teaching and learning so that they might be worthy of being called "educators." This is indeed the story of a school that decided to 'own' and move their mountain of excuses so that kids and families were not forced to overcome unnecessary obstacles, just to reach the general education classroom.

So what's the big deal?

People often ask us, what was the catalyst for the change in your school? Maybe it was the thought of students sitting or even sometimes laying under the desks reading their books while the other kids were watching a video. Or maybe it was the thought of taking a student who was nonverbal to a classroom with no other children to accomplish the goal of talking. Or maybe it was the idea that a physical disability was related to IQ and therefore an automatic pass into the resource room that caused us to question the "educational practices" used in schools. But, it was also our passionate, undaunting, belief that ALL students are valued that inspired us to take one of the most exciting educational journeys, ultimately leading to an extreme school makeover! This awe-inspiring journey usually prompts administrators, parents, and agencies to ask us, "How did you do it?" This article is our attempt to answer some of the common questions that are often asked, and it's also our chance to encourage every administrator to "move their mountain." We guarantee you won't believe what's on the other side!

Step One:

Build the Vision.

There's surely some truth to the saying "Where there is no vision...people perish." When we first entered into administrative positions at Twin Valley Middle School, we knew that we needed to take the time to formulate a vision for our school. We literally needed to have a mental picture of what our school should look like. As administrators we studied the current research and we looked to the work of great thinkers like Debbie Meiers, Ted Sizer, and Darlene Schoenly, to stretch our understanding of teaching and learning. We quickly discovered critical pieces that had to be in place if we were ever to be a school that was dedicated to serving all children. Our reading and reflecting on different literature led to a critical understanding of school change that was centered on best practice. This new insight became the framework of our non-negotiables. We then took the non-negotiables and began discussions with our faculty in an attempt to create the vision. We spent much time designing and engaging in provocative professional development with the intent to examine, explain, and reinforce the vision. We used every faculty meeting and every professional development day to initiate powerful, and sometimes painful, discussions with our faculty. We determined that every decision we made as a school would always need to be aligned with furthering the vision and mission of our school. Our vision centered on three parts:

1. **Creating a challenging curriculum** that would promote learning for every student.
2. **Developing strong relationships** between teachers and students.
3. **Finding ways to connect students** to each other and their school.

Once formulated, the vision became a unifying, and guiding light. As the questions about practice came up, such as "Can we pull Johnny down the hall to learn this math?" We'd go back to the vision. We would then ask the question "Will it make him feel connected to his teacher and other students if he's not in the classroom? No? Ok, then we've got to find another way to make sure we meet Johnny's needs in the classroom." As we used this process to answer questions, it was amazing how it clarified our thinking. We moved out of pointless arguments about "if" this could work, and started to engage in rich educational discussions on "how" it would work. These continued discussions created a focus and clarity in our school. Interestingly, by using the vision, teachers soon became experts at answering their own questions and the questions of colleagues. Questions that would have previously caused us to look backward and rely on ineffective prior practices were soon replaced with discussions centered on innovative techniques that were grounded in best practice.

Step Two:

Build the Framework

As we became focused on our mission to create a best practice school we soon realized that though our hearts and educational mindset were undergoing some radical change, our classrooms and instructional practice would need to follow. We knew that we were headed for an "extreme classroom makeover." As we analyzed our school we knew that classrooms had to change in two fundamental ways: structure and practice. The physical structure of our classrooms had been quite traditional, and we knew that this would need to change. We quickly moved away from rows of desks, to tables that would host cooperative learning opportunities. It also became apparent that we needed to replace our textbooks with trade books, magazines, manipulatives and other learning tools. We also realized that our time allocations had to change. We needed to move away from fragmented 45 minute periods which did not support sustained learning time, to extended segments of time that allowed for the implementation of reading and writing workshops.

In addition to the changes in our classroom structure, we also needed to make changes in our instructional practices. We replaced whole class teaching with mini lessons followed by small group learning activities. Our lessons which formerly included identical assignments for all, became differentiated, and allowed for participation of all learners. Students were no longer expected to "earn" their way into the classroom, but rather, the classroom and instruction would be changed and designed to meet each students' unique learning needs. Students no longer were expected to progress at the same level, at the same rate, on the same things. We began to experience the freedoms that were associated with differentiating instruction. As a faculty, we immersed ourselves in study on classroom workshops (yes even at the secondary level). We provided professional development on reading in every single content area. We studied best practice standards in teaching and learning and embedded them into our daily routines.

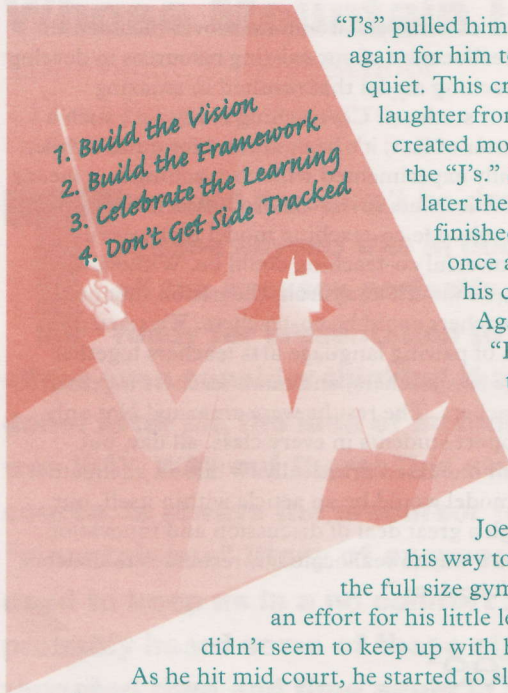
The final step in our extreme classroom makeover included the restructuring and reallocation of our existing resources to develop an innovative co-teaching model that resulted in amazing learning leaps for our students. Co-teaching really isn't such a new thing. As a matter of fact, it's been around for quite awhile. While we had initially experimented with co-teaching as a means of supporting diverse learners in our classrooms, it wasn't until we developed a school-wide co-teaching model that we truly experienced how powerful co-teaching could be. Without any additional staffing, we moved away from the notion that only special education teachers could be co-teachers. We started to research the effects of pairing language arts teachers together with other language arts teachers, and math teachers together with other math teachers. The results were amazing! Not only were we able to support students in every class, all day, but student achievement increased drastically. While an adequate description of the model would be an article within itself, our point is that through a great deal of discussion and innovation, we were able to find a way to reallocate our resources to do what many said "couldn't be done."

Step Three:

Celebrate the Learning

As we mentioned, the results were amazing! Amidst all the nay sayers, and those who said it couldn't be done, we proudly displayed our students' progress. The greatest gift though was undoubtedly the excitement on their faces as students sat with their peers, in their classroom, to engage in their learning. Equally exciting was watching teachers become learners, and learners become teachers. Our thoughts on teaching and learning shifted dramatically. While we once were annoyed, disappointed, or indifferent when students didn't learn, we now stepped up to the challenge and examined our teaching practices to determine how changing instructional practices could possibly propel a tangled student forward. It became a school-wide quest to figure out the learning needs of each student and how we could reach them.

The celebration of learning and belonging was not only reserved for teachers. Several stories come to mind, but one story in particular is worth recounting here. The students were lined up on the end line of the basketball court when Joey entered the gymnasium. The class was engaged in a team building activity which required them to line up by first letter of first name without talking. Joey, a student with Down Syndrome, immediately made his way over to the end line and wedged himself between two of his classmates. Looking down the line, he got into a crouched position, and yelled out "Ready, set, go." The students on either side looked at him and motioned with sign language to indicate that he should be quiet. He started to laugh hysterically at their pantomimes, which in turn made them giggle. After a minute, they took him and lined him up in between the "J's." Again, he crouched down, and his classmates were anticipating that he was getting ready to start with "Ready, set, go." Seeing this, the other



“J’s” pulled him up and motioned again for him to wait and be quiet. This created more laughter from Joey, which created more laughter from the “J’s.” Several minutes later the students had finished the activity and once again Joey got into his crouched position. Again he yelled, “Ready, set,” but this time, it was the teacher who finished with “Go, Joey, go.” Like a shot,

Joey started to make his way to the other end of the full size gym. Every step was an effort for his little legs, which just didn’t seem to keep up with his flailing arms. As he hit mid court, he started to slow down, and then the most amazing thing started to happen. Without

any prompting, one classmate, and then another, followed by another, started to shout encouragements from the end line. “Go Joey, you can do it, go!” Within seconds the gym was filled with the jeers of encouragement. Joey responded and continued his run. By now, some students had left the end line and were running beside and in front of him calling his name. Joey continued. As he got to the other end line, he raised his hands above his head as if he was breaking an imaginary finish line tape, at which point his classmates went absolutely wild. Within seconds the class had circled around him, high fiving him like the champion he was. As adults, we stood in amazement at what we had just witnessed. These students truly understood, valued, and celebrated the accomplishment of their classmate.

Step Four:

Don’t Get Side Tracked!

We finish this article with the importance of maintaining a clear focus on the purpose of school. We believe schools are designed to educate children, ALL children. There are many things that stand to distract from that focus. Even when schools chart a course and teachers and administrators are working hard for students and families, there are always people who will try to move us off course. The best illustration of this can only be demonstrated through a short but simple personal story. The doorbell rang, and I (Kim, second author) must say my relief became quickly apparent because when I saw the service man, I got right to it and said “Thank goodness you’re here! Now just come on back here into my bedroom, and I want you to listen.” As the man followed me into the bedroom I recounted the story

of how my husband and I had been kept awake by the bees that were buzzing in the wall. The man patiently listened with little to no expression. Desperate to convince him of the urgency of this matter, I directed him... “Come on over here and just put your ear up against the wall. It’s right up here,” I reached up and pointed to the area of concern, rubbed the wall in a circular motion, and offered the man a step stool, all in one breath. He declined the step stool. After several demonstrations of putting my own ear to the wall, I *finally* convinced him to get HIS ear up on the wall. Standing on his tip toes he pressed his ear to the wall, while I stood anxiously anticipating his response. When he pulled his ear away, I immediately peppered him with questions. “Did you hear them? Can you hear how loud they are?” and with each question he slowly shook his head yes. Thrilled with his affirmations I asked “How will you get those bees out of my wall?” With little expression, the man slowly answered “I don’t know lady; I’m here to install the carpets.”

It’s worth repeating, don’t get distracted! Now this carpet installer surely knew that his job and focus was to install carpets, yet, somehow, he let this crazy, half-pint Principal (Kim) lead him into the bedroom, talk him into putting his ear up against the wall, and begin a discussion about bees that had nothing at all to do with his mission of installing carpets.

There have been many times during the course of our quest to build a best practice school that would meet the needs of diverse learners, that we have run into people who have unknowingly, and unintentionally, tried to convince us to “listen to the bees in their wall.” These were good people who had ideas such as: if we could “just pull one kid out,” if “we could just send one student to a different classroom,” “if we only had a certain computer program,” or “if we only had a certain reading program”...

THEN we could do this thing called inclusion. We have found that building a best practice school first and foremost centers on valuing all students. It’s about hiring teachers who are learners. It requires taking the time to teach teachers to be expert designers of quality and engaging instruction.

As administrators and teachers we must indeed be the catalyst and voice of what education should be. We must create and guard the vision which guarantees that schools will always belong to ALL children. Most importantly, we must be willing to reframe the question from “Will I build a school that values and educates all children” to “What will we change to make sure that our school will always belong to all students?” Never forget, schools belong to children.

Drs. Cathy L. Taschner and Kimberly R. Donahue are co-principals at Twin Valley Middle School and recipients of the Inclusive Education Administrator of the Year Award. For more information about this article, please contact Cathy at ctaschner@dejazzd.com